

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian VII. Fight to the Finish

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The Marines, having breached Japan's outpost line and penetrated its defenses, ended 1944 with six divisions plus nine amtrac and three armored amphibian battalions in base camps in Hawaii, the Marianas, and southern Solomons. The tranquility was momentary. Even as Army troops were preparing to storm onto Luzon, the 3d, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions were readying to strike Iwo Jima. That 8 square miles of volcanic ash, dominated by 550-foot Mount Surabachi, stood halfway between the B-29 bases in the Marianas and the Japanese homeland. Its radar gave 2 hours warning of incoming B-29 flights, and its fighters challenged their passage. Seizure of Iwo would deny the Japanese these advantages and provide the Americans a base for escort aircraft and haven for emergency landings. The Japanese island commander, determined to thwart any such move, had cleverly inserted his 20,000 troops and their fearsome weapons, including launchers for 550-pound projectiles, into a violently broken terrain larded with caves to create a seemingly impenetrable defense system.

The Marines planned to land the 4th and 5th Divisions in 426 amtracs of the 5th, 10th, 3d, and 11th Amtrac Battalions behind 68 LVT(A)s of the 2d Armored Amphibian Battalion. The absence of reefs and deep offshore waters promised an easy landing. It was anticipated that, once the assault units and 200 tons of priority supplies on each of 28 LSTs were ashore, the amtracs would withdraw. The landing on 19 February was uneventful; one LVT(A) lost and eight battalions of infantry ashore in 30 minutes. Then a tempest of shot and shell turned the landing area into a hell where deep ash made all movement unexpectedly difficult. Only amtracs with cleated tracks were unhampered. These were promptly engaged in endless transport tasks, among them positioning artillery, bringing water and ammunition to the infantry, and evacuating the many wounded. On 23 February, the American flag breaking out atop Surabachi eased the fatigue of 4 days of violence and renewed the Marines' determination to carry on. The next day the 3d Marine Division came ashore. By 16 March this epic battle that had cost 25,000 Marine and Navy casualties was over. In

the long month of demanding effort, the amtrac units had lost 191 men and 123 machines.

Fifteen days after the guns ceased fire on Iwo Jima, 1,300 ships lay off Okinawa ready to launch the last amphibious assault of the Pacific War. It began on 1 April, an Easter Sunday greeted by naval gunfire rather than church bells. It reached its climax at 0800, when assault infantry of the 1st and 6th Marine Divisions, in four battalions of amtracs screened by two battalions of armored amphibians, headed for the reef fronting the Hagushi beaches. The Army's 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions, similarly embarked, moved out at the same time. Resistance to the landing was negligible and by 1600 there were 50,000 soldiers and Marines ashore. The eventful day was marred only by the loss of 53 Marines and 12 amtracs when kamikazes hit 2d Marine Division units engaged in a demonstration off the Minatoga beaches across from the main landings.

The four divisions initially advanced towards the opposite coast. Thereafter the Marines swung north to clear that part of Okinawa while the Army turned south, toward the main Japanese defenses. A month later, the Marines took over the western sector of the Tenth Army front where, on 21 June, the struggle ended. The victory had cost 57,000 casualties, 142 from the amtrac units. Defeat left the Japan-



A dramatic aerial shot taken during the early hours of 19 February 1945, D-day at Iwo Jima.

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 95.



LVT(3)s in use at Quantico in 1950. LVT(3)s were first used at Okinawa. Cargo Capacity: 12,000 pounds, 25% more than LVT(4). Speed: 17mph on land, 6mph in the water. Range: 150 miles on land, 75 miles in water.

ese with twice that number in dead alone. Once again the Japanese had shown their determination did not lessen as the distance to their homeland shortened.



On Iwo Jima, Japanese laid "yardstick" mines on top of aerial bombs. If detonated, the explosions were powerful enough to lift 30 tons of LVT and cargo and blow a hole in the vehicle's bottom.

The Marines had 434 cargo amtracs on Okinawa, 210 new LVT(3)s. These twin-engine machines had 25 percent more cargo capacity than LVT(4)s of equal size and proved able performers. Another novelty was the employment of LVT(A)4s as self-propelled artillery. Lt-Col Louis Metzger had trained his 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion to provide the firepower of 12 batteries of 75mm howitzers through five fire directions centers tied to the Division Artillery Fire Control Command net. This capability well supported the mobile operations of the 6th Marine Division in the north where cargo amtracs also found a role as personnel carriers. This demonstration of the amtrac's operational flexibility on Okinawa entailed insignificant losses and was a fitting manner for this unique and indispensable vehicle to end the war.

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